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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest reviews the school restructuring tool of career academies serving the non-college bound student. The career academy movement began with the Electrical Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The model was exported to California where it became the basis for the Peninsula Academies in the Sequoia Union High School District and from there the movement has spread nationally. Most career academies share a number of attributes: school-within-a-school format, voluntary student participation, broadly-defined career themes, integration of academic and vocational curricula, scheduling that keeps students together throughout the day and throughout the 3- or 4-year program, rigorous academic courses, work experience, high levels of involvement by local businesses, and outside funding from business and government sources. One of the strongest features of the academy model is its curricular and pedagogical coordination that integrates academic and vocational courses and allows collaboration between teachers. Most career academies emerged in urban districts and have served the disadvantaged population that is at risk of dropping out. The voluntary nature of the academies extends to faculty and staff. From the beginning, academies have benefited from a high level of business involvement. Career academies require a significant financial investment by school districts but the long-term benefits appear to outweigh the investments required. (Contains six references.) (JB)

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# CAREER ACADEMIES: EDUCATING URBAN STUDENTS FOR CAREER SUCCESS

## Introduction

Recently it has been recognized that many schools have not educated non-college bound students well. Even those students who do finish high school are frequently underprepared for the growing cognitive demands of the modern workplace, and dropout rates remain high. Thus, a significant percentage of the workforce is hard-pressed to meet even the minimum requirements of employability. Career academies have been developed as a school restructuring tool intended to address these problems: to help cut dropout rates, to improve student performance, and to equip students to face the complexities of future employment.

## History

The first career academy—the Electrical Academy—was created in 1969 in Philadelphia at the Thomas Edison High School, which had the highest dropout rate in the city (Neubauer, 1986). By 1991, eight programs in 16 high schools were in place in Philadelphia (Stern, Raby, & Dayton, 1992). In 1981, the model was exported to California, where it became the basis for the Peninsula Academies in the Sequoia Union High School District south of San Francisco. Between 1985 and 1987, this program—now called the California partnership academies and supported by state legislation and funding—spread throughout the state (Stern et al., 1992). By 1992, academies had been established focusing on 20 different career fields, including agribusiness, communication and video technology, finance, environmental technology, and transportation (Stern et al., 1992).

## The Academy Model

Since most career academies around the country were modelled upon the Philadelphia and Peninsula efforts, they share a number of attributes. In general, they:

- are organized as schools-within-schools, with a small community of students and a small, self-contained set of five to ten counselors and teachers, one of whom acts as the program's "lead teacher";
- recruit students to volunteer for the program;
- focus on broadly-defined career themes—such as computers, electronics, or health—rather than on the job-specific outlines of traditional vocational education;
- choose career areas with growing demands and with good employment opportunities in the local market;
- integrate academic and vocational curricula and use block-scheduling to keep students together in unified groups throughout the day and throughout the entire three- or four-year program;
- eliminate tracking by setting rigorous academic courses into the context of occupational training, giving students the option to continue their education after graduation;
- make work experience a component of the educational process by systematically exposing students to job interviews and issues of work ethics and behavior;
- are sustained by high levels of involvement by local business, as well as strong parental support; and
- receive significant outside funding, from both business and government sources (Stern et al., 1992; Dayton, Weisberg, & Stern, 1989).

In addition, students in the academies must meet all state and local requirements for graduation.

One of the strongest features of the academy model is its curricular and pedagogical coordination. Not only does it integrate academic and vocational courses—preparing students for college as well as for careers—but the academy's small size allows an uncommon measure of collaboration between teachers. In the California academies students take four classes as a group every semester—usually three academic and one technical. Because the academy's teachers are a self-contained group, they share a common planning period every day, are able to design carefully interrelated lesson plans, and can coordinate team-teaching efforts.

Since academy students progress as a group, classes from the beginning to the end of the entire three- or four-year program can be designed as a sequence rather than as a grab-bag of unrelated units (Stern et al., 1992). Such program-wide coordination, enhanced by the academy's small size and cohesive student body, allows the creation of strong career development programs. It also generates consistently high expectations for student success (Archer, Weinbaum, & Montesano, 1989). All classes—technical as well as academic—combine the cognitive rigor of academies with the hands-on orientation of vocational training.

## Career Academy Participants

Career academies have, for the most part, emerged in urban districts, where dropping out and unemployment have been particularly acute. As a result, their primary intent has been to serve students at risk of leaving high school (Archer et al., 1989; Stern et al., 1992). Many students recruited for academies have come from poor backgrounds, have poor attendance and grades, and have amassed insufficient course credits. In the California program during the 1987-88 school year, academies were almost evenly divided between males and females, and contained comparatively high percentages of African American and Latino students (Dayton, Weisberg, & Stern, 1989).

An important feature of career academies is that students attend by choice; though they may be recruited, they must fill out an admissions application. Thus, they must demonstrate a strong commitment to the academy, and they tend to develop a high degree of pride and a sense of belonging. In re-



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cent years, academies have attracted a broader cross-section of students interested in a career. This suggests that the academy model has potential beyond its original function as a dropout prevention measure, although care must be taken that academies do not begin to "cream" the best students away from their host schools, leaving those schools to deal with large numbers of disadvantaged students (Stern et al., 1992).

## Academy Staffing

The voluntary nature of academies extends to faculty and administration. Like other restructuring models, academies thrive on the presence of a director with a clear vision of their importance. Similarly, because they depend upon a tightly-knit faculty, academies should be staffed by dedicated teacher volunteers. Appointed teachers often lack commitment to the model; their presence may lead to a high turnover rate, subverting the collegial atmosphere required by academies.

## Business Involvement in Academies

From the beginning, academies have benefitted from a high level of business involvement. Such participation may take the form of financial support to help offset the high costs of academies, especially during the start-up phase (Archer et al., 1989). More commonly, however, businesses take a "hands-on" approach, providing not only summer and after-school jobs, but also volunteering speakers, mentors, and even teachers (Stern et al., 1992). In fact, because the success of an academy depends upon its links with the business community, extensive collaboration between the schools and local business is built into the model from the earliest planning stages. Business participation is carefully planned to coordinate with both academic and vocational instruction. This integration of business and education can give students not only work experience, but also an invaluable introduction to the job market and workplace culture.

## Academy Evaluation

School restructuring projects require careful, ongoing evaluation (Archer et al., 1989). Because the California academies have been replicated throughout the state, they have profited from such analysis, required by the legislation allowing their proliferation. Though this analysis is somewhat hampered by the lack of a truly experimental random-assignment method of assigning students to the academies, it has found that the schools do have a positive impact on keeping students in school, as well as upon the future employment and education of graduates (Stern et al., 1992).

Reports on the Peninsula Academies suggest features important for new career academies. They must maintain:

- strict adherence to the full career academy model;
- a clearly defined process for selecting students and ensuring that the program remains voluntary;
- strong support from the private sector;
- an emphasis on career planning;
- a full range of student support services such as counseling and mentoring programs;
- a high degree of commitment from teachers, administrators, and the business community; and
- an identifiable physical space for the academy, to reinforce students' sense of belonging (Dayton, Reller, & Evans, 1987).

Because academies require the active participation of local business—and because their career themes are geared toward local employment possibilities—they should reflect the cultural and economic features of the areas in which they are established (Stern et al., 1992).

## Conclusion

As restructuring tools, career academies require a significant financial investment. Not only are their start-up costs high, but their reliance upon small communities of students and teachers makes the per-student price higher in comparison to traditional schools—an important consideration in districts facing budget cuts (Archer et al., 1989). However, studies factoring in the societal costs associated with continuing high dropout rates show that the long-term benefits far outweigh the investments required by academies (Stern, Dayton, Paik, & Weisberg, 1989). As an educational and vocational operation, career academies may be a long-term bargain.

**— Gary Burnett**

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